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SCANDINAVIAN GROUSE

A discussion of the suitability of the Northern Peninsula for them

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FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS IT HAS been the dream of many Northern Peninsula sportsmen, especially those with such names as Blomquist, Petersen, and Heinonen, to introduce the two big grouse species of the Scandinavian forests, the black grouse and the capercaillie. The memory of the big black birds in the snow-powdered nordic woods, may be also the pleasant memory of the taste of fried blackcock with cranberry jam, may be some of the primary reasons for the desire of the U. P. sportsmen to have these birds in the woods.

The Michigan Department of Conservation gave me the honour and responsibility of touring the northern woods with Dr. G. A. Ammann, grouse specialist of the Game Division, for a couple of weeks in September and October, 1948. We drove two thousand miles and saw the U.P. from Drummond Island to Ironwood, from Fort Wilkins to Menominee. And what a wonderful country it is: the extensive forests and clear cool streams, the sandy soil, the white birches, and blond, blue-eyed girls aroused memories about the old country—but that is another story as Kipling says.

Before we discuss in more detail the findings of the trip and the suitability of the area for the species in question, it might be well to present the two birds.

The black grouse (in Danish: urfugl, Finnish: teeri, Norwegian: arfugl, Swedish: orre) is somewhat bigger than a prairie chicken. The blackcock weighs 1.1—1.5 kilo (2½-3½ pounds); he is black with a lyre-shaped tail. The grey-hen is brown like a ruffed grouse, and weighs about a kilo (2.2 pounds). The blackcocks gather and fight at the booming

grounds in the spring. The hen lays 7-10 rust brown, dark spotted eggs.

The capercaillie (in Danish: tjur, Finnish: metso, Norwegian: storfugl, Swedish: tjader) is the biggest of the grouse family, the king of the northern forest. Males average 3.5 kilo (8 pounds), but the older males weigh up to 6.5 kilo (14-15 pounds). The female is much lighter, and weighs about 2 kilo (4-5 pounds). The capercaillie males usually boom individually, often on the branch of a tall pine; where many birds occur several cocks might play together on a specific booming ground. The hen lays 6-10 eggs, much like turkey eggs, rust brown and spotted.

It is understandable that Scandinavians, used to seeing these birds in the forests of the old country, would

like to have them in their new home country; and it appears that interest for introduction of these birds is also found among other members of the U. P. family: the Koboskis, the McAdamses, the Boudreaus.

Experiments have been carried out at an earlier date with black grouse as well as capercaillie. Both species have been introduced to various parts of the northern regions of the United States and Canada. In 1904, 143 black grouse and capercaillie were released on Grand Island at Munising by the Cleveland Cliffs Iron Co., and 58 more birds were turned loose in 1905. All birds disappeared within a year or two.

To this author, Grand Island did not look very promising as a black grouse habitat. The forest is too dense, no openings for booming grounds, and lack of a sufficient berry-vegetation seemed to be some of the major reasons for failure of these early attempts.

At first thought, the capercaillie, the bigger of the two, would seem to be an ideal bird for the northern woods. Bagging of only one male bird would be quite a heavy load, and the flight of one of the big, black birds over the forest would be a sight many a native as well as tourists would not forget in a hurry.

However, the areas investigated did not look promising as capercaillie habitat. The bird prefers extensive pine forest with scattered poplar and birch, wide openings and moorlands opening up to the forest at intervals, and a rich bottom flora consisting of cranberry, bilberry, blackberry, raspberry, and juniper bushes spread uniformly over the area.

The U. P. lacks thus some of the more important food plants. Further it is believed that the summers might be too warm for the successful establishment of the bird. Finally, it has to be borne in mind that this big bird is a big target and a lot of tasty meat, for which reason the bird might be hunted heavily. The male can be hunted by stalking him on early mornings in the spring when he is booming from the branch of a pine. A very few ruthless hunters could in this way illegally destroy a great number of sportsmen's devoted care and work for establishment of the birds.

The price for these big birds would also be too much considering the probably poor results. Admittedly, the big capercaillie would be a myth of the northern woods; it would attract tourists, ornithologists, and sportsmen as well. But confronted with the definite lack of some of the basic requirements of the bird: sufficient supply of the right kinds of food; effective protection from poaching, especially

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during spring and fall booming; and more open forest and regular openings and moorlands in the forest, it is probable that importation and release of this bird would be a failure from the very beginning.

The smaller cousin of the capercaillie, the black grouse would be a very worthwhile game bird for the Northern Peninsula, if it just could thrive there.

Its good size, the male's black, shiny plumage and lyre-shaped tail, the interesting booming performances on the booming ground in the spring, the good hunting afforded, and the good taste of the meat are some of the factors worth mentioning. Winter snow and ice do not bother this species which in Scandinavia is found even up north of the Polar Circle.

Black grouse and capercaillie are found in more or less the same type of habitat, the black grouse, however, being more a bird of the open forest, moorlands, and heaths. What above has been said about the habitat requirements of the capercaillie therefore also obtains for the black grouse.

But as the black grouse of the two seems to be the more adaptable, is smaller, and therefore cheaper to get for an eventual introduction, and is not so vulnerable by poaching, this species will be discussed in more detail.

Many areas of the U. P. were looked over for possible black grouse introductions; valuable information and helpful suggestions were received from district game managers, conservation officers and local sportsmen, and I guess I can say that we saw about what the U. P. offers in regard to variety of forest types.

One striking difference between the native habitat of this bird and the landscape in the Northern Peninsula is the complete lack of heather in the latter and also lack or at least only fragmentary presence of important food plants such as cranberry, blueberry, bog myrtle, and juniper. Ferns, grasses and sedges form the great bulk of plants present in the U. P. forest openings and forests, and they do not produce much usable food for black grouse. The winter diet on the other hand seems to be present, as the black grouse during that time mainly feeds on buds of birch, shoots of conifers, and catkins.

The U. P. forest is also more dense than the open, light Scandinavian boreal forest; for that reason the vegetation on the forest floor is more sparse, little light penetrating the dense conifers.

Another necessary part of the black grouse habitat is the booming ground for which an open heath, a good-sized forest opening, moorland, or in the northern part of the range a frozen lake, satisfies. The booming ground must be so big that it affords protection for the birds from sudden intruders. Areas suitable for booming grounds were found in several places of cut-over forest lands, but suitable, natural openings of the right size and vegetation were very scarce.

Quite another factor to consider is the climatic conditions. Without yet having final proof I believe that the unsuccessful introductions of Hungarian partridges to the lower two-thirds of the United States were in some way or another tied up with hot summers and heavy rainfalls, in combination with clayish soil. The hot summers might also be a hindrance for the successful fulfillment of the reproductive cycle of the black grouse.

The black grouse is a bird of the vast heaths and the extensive forests. It does not get along with tourists and people roaming around all over the place. It is therefore found in isolated areas, of which the U. P. naturally can show many. This bird, also, can be poached, either on the booming ground or by use of decoys in the winter time, for which reason interest for protection and legalized hunting has to be predominant among the local as well as non-resident hunters. Hunting of this bird is difficult; it is a good flyer and is difficult to find, and it flushes often at long distance where found in open country.

The black grouse has but few enemies, and in that respect it would be able to get along all right in the Northern Peninsula. Very few diseases attack this bird, and the few eventually found are of no importance for the population as such.

Rearing of black grouse in captivity has been done successfully in Sweden and Denmark; but artificial propagation of this Don Juan of the woods is very difficult and expensive so it does not have any practical application.

Although importation and release of black grouse in the U. P. cannot be recommended, based on the study carried out, it is not said that the birds will not thrive there. The areas are not barren of food, and nobody knows how far the birds might adapt themselves to new sources of food. The whole matter is dubious, however, as former releases of thousands and thousands of birds of a host of species have been made all over the globe; and upland game birds have been found starving to death with plenty of excellent food bulging right under their bills. Birds seem to be very slow in adapting themselves to new foods.

In case experiments with liberation of birds are wanted in spite of the prospect of poor results, three areas were selected, areas which were as close in floristic composition, topography, soil type, isolation and general look as possible to the native habitat of the bird. These areas are: the Garden Peninsula, where extensive forest openings, forest lands, and cranberry bogs look favourable, where the birds would be sufficiently isolated, but where the summers might be too hot; second an area in the Keweenaw Peninsula, with sufficient forest openings, well isolated, and with as cool summers as the U. P. can show; finally the Seney Refuge, where vast moorlands look rather favourable if the birds only could adapt themselves to the food present. The complete protection and the good check on the birds by the refuge personnel would be a great advantage.

There has to be great interest on the part of the sportsmen in case of introduction of the birds; during our study we found that this interest and willingness to cooperate and also to make sacrifices was present among the local sportsmen. But non-resident hunters should adhere to the same principles, which some of them might not; many non-residents might not even know about the experiments if carried out. And black grouse could be confused with native grouse. Complete protection for a number of years would be necessary in order to test the success of liberation. Because of confusion with native grouse (by unskilled hunters), and influx of non-resident hunters unaware of the experiments, it would be necessary to close the areas involved to all game-

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bird hunting for a number of years until the success of the release was determined.

Birds for release could be obtained from the Scandinavian countries. A minimum of 25 birds should be planted within an area to give them a fair try, and release of the birds should be preceded by naturalization after the shipment, by keeping them in large holding pens for several weeks and gradually adapting them to eat the new foods.

Some of the factors involved in the eventual introduction of black grouse and capercaillie to the Northern Peninsula have been discussed. The lacks of the area have been pointed out, and the possibilities for success dealt with.

Finally it might be well to ask ourselves if such an introduction is necessary, if it is sound, and if it is morally correct.

First it might be said that native species, adapted to their particular environment, are to be preferred by far to imported birds, wherever they might come from, however bright they might be, and whatever reasons we might have to introduce them. The native bird, during scores of generations adapted to the particular conditions, is the ultimate product of the wonder of adaptation. The native grouse of the U. P. is the ruffed grouse, or partridge as it is called up there; the ruffed grouse is a prince in the gallinaceous royalty, an excellent game bird, an interesting study object, a tidbit for the tongue, and there is history in him: he was hunted by the Indians years and years before the white man ever swung an axe against a U. P. pine, and his drumming sounds like the heartbeat of the forest itself. We humans are funny creatures, often we do not see the pearls right in front of us, but want to get something from somewhere else, just because it is different.

Next we have to consider various aspects in relation to introduction of exotic game birds: Will they compete with native species? Will they do damage to crops? Do they carry new diseases which might affect the native birds? All these questions can undoubtedly be answered negatively; the black grouse established would probably not cause any trouble, although you never know before you see. The only native species the black grouse might compete with would be the sharptail grouse. In choosing between these two species the native sharptail should be preferred. He immigrated himself when the forests were cleared, adapted himself, and proved a good new citizen.

Our only defense for introduction of new game birds, our only sound motive, is the introduction of a species to an artificially created ecological niche, caused by man's activities, and for which particular niche no native game bird is present. That is why the pheasant in Ohio's corn fields is a sound thing. The clearing of the forest excluded the ruffed grouse; the bobwhite quail in Ohio is on its northern limit and does not occur in sufficient numbers; the sharptail and prairie chicken cannot survive under Ohio farming conditions. The exotic pheasant fits into the created niche.

Concerning black grouse and capercaillie there seem to be no holes to fill out in the U. P. The ruffed grouse drums in the dark woods, sharptails boom and cackle on the cut-over forest lands. There is no place left, nothing in between where the black grouse and capercaillie with their specific requirements would fit.